

As for the vertical differentiation, it is increasingly becoming a major concern for the government, higher education institutions and stakeholders at large. Higher education institutions are joining international/national rankings and classifications to enable measurement of the achievements and comparative analysis across time and systems. Among the steps leading to vertical differentiation was the attempt of the government to invite highly ranked higher education institutions to establish their branch campuses in Armenia (e.g., Moscow State University).

Major transformations were also caused by Armenia's joining the Bologna Declaration in 2005. As a result, new buffer bodies were established to manage accountability (the Armenian National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance) and qualification recognition (the ArmNaric). The Armenian National Qualifications Framework (ANQF) was adopted in 2011 to promote alignment of the qualifications with those at the European level (EQF). Next, a move to a two-tier education with 4+2 model was completed. As of 2007 all the higher education institutions began implementing the European Credit Transfer System. Diploma Supplements were subsequently introduced to promote transparency and recognition of the qualifications awarded.

Conclusion

In sum, the transformations in the Armenian higher education system in the form of differentiation at diverse levels is an apparent trend. Considering the fact that the drivers behind this differentiation are predominantly market requirements and political strategies at the government level leading to international visibility with regard to qualifications and research, Armenia's higher education system is governed by a balance of national and global forces leading to convergence. Although it is still early to talk about the actual practical results, at policy debate level Armenia's higher education system is becoming more convergent with European ones. It is primarily done through the introduction of such major tools as the ANQF, independent quality assurance and accountability system, operationalization of credit transfer and accumulation system, a move towards two-tier education (BA and MA) and others.

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Notes

- [1] Offer higher, postgraduate and supplementary education in a wide variety of branches of natural and sociological fields, science, technology, and culture, as well as providing opportunities for scientific research.
- [2] Intergovernmental are the higher education institutions that are established through an agreement between two countries, e.g., American University of Armenia, French University of Armenia.
- [3] Transnational are the higher education institutions that offer home qualifications in a host setting, e.g., Moscow State University in Armenia
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Higher Education Snapshot of Azerbaijan

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Drivers of Change in Higher Education

During the Soviet times, Azerbaijan's higher education system resembled that of other Soviet republics. Higher education institutions catered industry and public institutions with specialized labor to serve the system. Education was tightly controlled by the government and shaped by the needs of the economy. Since the independence, higher education system has changed and developed under the influence of internal (demographic, political, social, and economic) and external factors (international relations, involvement of international development organizations, etc.). Increased interest in privatization and private institutions, emerging need for meeting the demand for skilled labor in the new open market economy, and the goal of upgrading the system in accordance with international standards to better integrate into the world were amongst the major drivers of change.

Institutional Diversity and Differentiation

Changes following the independence were reflected in numbers and diversity of institutions. In 1990, right before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were 17 higher education institutions providing education to 105,000 students in Azerbaijan. During the academic year 2013-14, about 151,000 students studied in 53 institutions. The establishment of new public universities was carried out through merging and splitting previously existing universities as well as non-university institutions. For instance, eleven teacher technicums (technical vocational schools) in different regions of Azerbaijan were upgraded to branches of Azerbaijan Teachers Institute and later, united under Azerbaijan Pedagogical University. "Institutes" are slowly phasing out in the system as they are relabeled as "universities."

The upgrade of former Soviet institutes into universities was also followed by program expansion and system developments. Major increase was observed in the number of comprehensive higher education institutions due to the government's regional development policy. During the Soviet time, there was only one comprehensive university in the country – Azerbaijan State University. There are five state and eleven private comprehensive universities now.

Unlike during the Soviet period, most of the regional institutions nowadays provide not specialized but rather comprehensive education. However, when universities are compared, there is an apparent difference in relation to research and internationalization policies between regional institutions and those in the capital. State universities in the capital city and some private universities focus more on research and attracting international students, while regional universities perform low on these two dimensions.

Expansion of Private Universities

The increase in the number of higher education institutions was partially due to degraded quality of vocational education and its decreased value in the country, as well as to the expansion of private and cross border universities. Within the first fifteen years after the independence (1990-2005) gross enrolment ratio in vocational education fell from 38.9% in 1990 to 14.2% (AEU & UNESCO 2008). Therefore, more than 100 private post-secondary (vocational colleges) and higher education institutions were established during the first five years of independence. The key factor that propelled the increase was the society's awakening interest in privatization and private enterprise. Corruption issues and low educational quality in public institutions also contributed towards the appeal to the private institutions; instead of embarking upon studies with uncertain cost due to bribery at a public university, parents and students started viewing private universities as a better alternative (Catterall & McGhee 1996). Growing demand in graduates with English language skills trained in important fields such as business, management and administration and public universities' failure to meet this demand created fertile conditions for the private sector.

Higher Education Enrolment

However, the increase in the number of higher education institutions and interest in higher education was not followed by a rapid and prominent growth in student enrolment. On the contrary, gross enrolment ratio declined in the first years of independence and reached the 1980s level only in 1998. Decrease in enrolment was caused by the introduction of tuition fees and new admission system. Due to economic decline, poverty and war after the independence, families could afford neither tuition fees nor the costs of tutoring for admission exams.

The expansion of the private sector ceased too with the introduction of new quality assurance mechanisms. While some private universities established themselves as institutions providing fair and quality education, others were notorious for corruption and low quality. Therefore, only 10 out of 100 newly established private institutions acquired formal legal status after being evaluated by an expert commission by the Ministry of Education and obtained permission for functioning from the Cabinet of Ministers in 1995 (Catterall & McGhee 1996).

Not only the decline in numbers but also limited resources, centralized admission process, tightly controlled higher education market and educational quality resulted in low participation rates in tertiary education (Aliyev 2011). In 2012, 20.2% of the five-year-after-secondary-school cohort were enrolled in vocational (4.2%) and higher education (16%).

Conclusion

Currently, higher education system in Azerbaijan encompasses diverse public and private institutions, which are ranked yearly based on their reputation and attractiveness to students. Institutions also demonstrate horizontal diversity with various foci of study and research. Yet, the diversity and differentiation of higher education does not make it more accessible for students. Azerbaijan still remains a country with an elitist higher education system with one of the lowest enrolment rates among the former Soviet countries.

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